



I Love History

HOW TO THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

Student Inquiry Toolkit

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HISTORY INVESTIGATORS

Historians are a lot like detectives. They look for evidence from the past to figure out how and why things happened the way they did. The evidence comes from primary sources--the things that people created at that time and place in history.

Historians use many different types of primary sources. Here are just a few examples

THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN:

- Newspapers/magazines
- Letters
- Documents

THINGS THAT ARE IMAGES:

- Photographs
- Maps
- Drawings

THINGS THAT HAVE AUDIO OR VIDEO:

- Radio
- Film
- Television

THINGS THAT PEOPLE MADE OR USED:

- Tools
- Clothing
- Art

THINGS THAT ARE SPOKEN:

- Oral traditions are memorized, spoken narratives that pass down histories and teachings from one generation to the next. Oral traditions are important primary sources for Native American peoples.
- Oral histories are spoken interviews with people about their own experiences. The interviews are usually audio recorded and then transcribed (written down).



Photo by Markus Spiske on unsplash

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources are bits of evidence that show what people did, believed, or said in the past.

Historians piece together many primary sources from a time and place to figure out how and why things happened the way they did.

It's important that historians know if an object provides information about the topic they are investigating. Just like detectives, historians examine each source to make sure it provides reliable information about the event.

Here are some questions to help you figure out if an item from the past is a reliable primary source for your topic:

WHEN?

- What year was this item created?
- Was it created during the time period you are investigating?

WHERE?

- Where was this item created?
- Is it from the place you are investigating?

WHO?

- Who created this item?
- Did they experience or observe this event as it happened?

RELEVANT?

- Is this item relevant to the topic?
- Does this item tell you something about the topic?



Boy with sled, Salt Lake City, 1909

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN:

You are investigating how Utahns helped the war effort during World War II (1941-1945).

Which of these photographs is a good primary source for your topic? Why?

Hint: Look at the date each photo was taken. Which one was taken during World War II?



Releasing a Man for Service, Kearns Army Depot, 1944



USMC AV-8 Harrier Jump Jet, Wendover Air Base, 1976

HOW TO THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

Once you know what primary sources are, you can begin to think like a historian.

Just like detectives, historians gather as much evidence as they can about what happened. This means they gather as many primary sources as they can.

Then, they analyze the evidence. This means they ask a lot of questions about the primary sources.

By analyzing many different primary sources, historians can learn a lot about an event, person, community, or time period.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

Use the Observe-Question-Reflect worksheet to analyze these primary sources from Utah's past.



Utah girl with sugar beet harvest, (courtesy Utah State Historical Society)

ABOUT THIS SOURCE

This girl is standing in front of freshly harvested sugar beets grown in Utah. In one hand she holds a cleaned beet, in the other hand a glass with the amount of granulated sugar one beet yields. Sugar beets were an important cash crop grown in Utah and Idaho. This photo was taken by the Utah Department of Publicity and Industrial Development. The exact date it was created is unknown, but based on the girl's clothing, we can estimate it was taken during the 1930s.



Finnish coal miner, 9 years old, (detail; courtesy Utah State Historical Society)

ABOUT THIS SOURCE

This boy immigrated from Finland to Carbon County, Utah. He worked in the Castle Gate Mine when he was 9 years old. His job was cleaning up loose coal and animal droppings from the tunnels in the mine. He is wearing a miner's hat with a lamp, and is holding a pickaxe. This photo was taken around the year 1900.

I finished the ninth grade, and then my parents, being from Denmark, thought when a boy reached the age of 15, he should earn his own living. So I got a job in the mine loading coal. I used to go into the mine every day and load six three-ton cars and drill three holes, lay my track up to the face and set two timbers one day, and the next day do the same. The mine company would shoot the coal down to you at night. We were paid 79 cents for every ton of coal we loaded.

Coal miner's oral history (courtesy Utah State Historical Society)

ABOUT THIS SOURCE

Elias Degn's parents immigrated to Utah from Denmark in 1906. Elias was born in Redmond, a town in Sevier County, in 1908. This is a short excerpt from an oral history interview that Degn recorded when he was 64 years old. In this oral history, Degn shared many memories of what his childhood and adult life was like in Utah's mining country.

OBSERVE-QUESTION-REFLECT

Study the source and answer as many of the questions as you can. Write down your answers, ideas, and questions about the source. You may go up and down between the boxes as you analyze each source.

OBSERVE

- What do you notice first?
- Find something small but interesting.
- What do you notice that you didn't expect?
- What do you notice that you can't explain?
- What do you notice that you didn't notice earlier?
- What words or ideas does this item express?
- What questions do you have about what you see?

QUESTION

- Who created this?
- When and where was it created?
- Why was it created?
- What was its purpose/goal?
- Is its message similar or different from other primary sources from that time and place? Explain.

REFLECT

- What does this source make you wonder about?
- What does this item tell you about that time and place?
- Who was the audience for this item?
- What was the creator's message?
- What was the creator's point of view?
- Why does this item matter?
- What else was happening when this was made?

Adapted from: Library of Congress, Teacher's Guide: Analyzing Primary Sources

KEY STATE STANDARDS:

Utah Core Standards for Social Studies, Grades 3-6

"There are many skills specific to the disciplines within social studies. For example, historians must avoid "present-mindedness," not judging the past solely in terms of the norms and values of today, but taking into account the historical context in which the event unfolded – the values, outlook, crises, options, and contingencies of that time and place. Social scientists must be able to analyze and interpret primary sources: documents, film, statistical data, artifacts, art, and other media that can inform and intrigue students... Whenever possible, the core encourages this skill development."

7th Grade Utah Studies Core Standards

"...students will engage in inquiry using the tools, conceptual understandings and the language of historians, geographers, economists, and political scientists at a developmentally appropriate level. Students will craft arguments, apply reasoning, make comparisons, and interpret and synthesize evidence as historians, geographers, economists and political scientists. They will corroborate their sources of evidence and place their interpretations within historical contexts."

8th Grade U.S. History I Core Standards - Foundational Skills of the Social Studies Disciplines

"Students should develop skills associated with the disciplines of history, geography, political science, and economics, most notably the ability to construct arguments using the evidence, texts, and tools valued within each discipline. Of particular importance in a United States history course is developing the reading, thinking, and writing skills of historians. These skills include the ability to think critically about evidence, use diverse forms of evidence to construct interpretations, and defend these interpretations through argumentative historical writing. Students will corroborate their sources of evidence and place their interpretations within historical contexts."

LEARNING OBJECTIVE:

Students will develop historical thinking skills, including identifying and analyzing primary historical sources. Skills are scaffolded and modeled through hands-on activities.

GUIDING QUESTION:

How can primary sources serve as a vehicle for exploring Utah's past?

VOCABULARY:

- Primary source
- Oral history
- World War II
- Sugar beet
- Mining

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- One copy of this packet per student (digital or print).

